

SEPTEMBER DESTINATIONS AUSTRALIA ✦ Tropical North Queensland Big bird watching in cassowary country ✦ Sydney This exhibition of 19th-century French drawings is definitely one to pencil in the diary

Destinations AUSTRALIA



On the trail of the elusive cassowary, a dedicated birdwatcher discovers that two in the bush is the preferred option in Tropical North Queensland.

WORDS SEAN DOOLEY

FEATHERWEIGHT CHAMPIONS



Southern cassowary; puff-breasted paradise kingfisher (opposite page)

STANDING 1.5M TALL WITH AN elongated, razor-sharp claw protruding from elephantine legs that can disembowel with one kick, the southern cassowary seems more like an avatar from a computer fantasy game than a bird. Thankfully, the cassowary is generally a shy, retiring loner, preferring to quietly go about its business of eating fallen fruit on the rainforest floor. At least, that's what you hope when you come eyeball to eyeball with one.

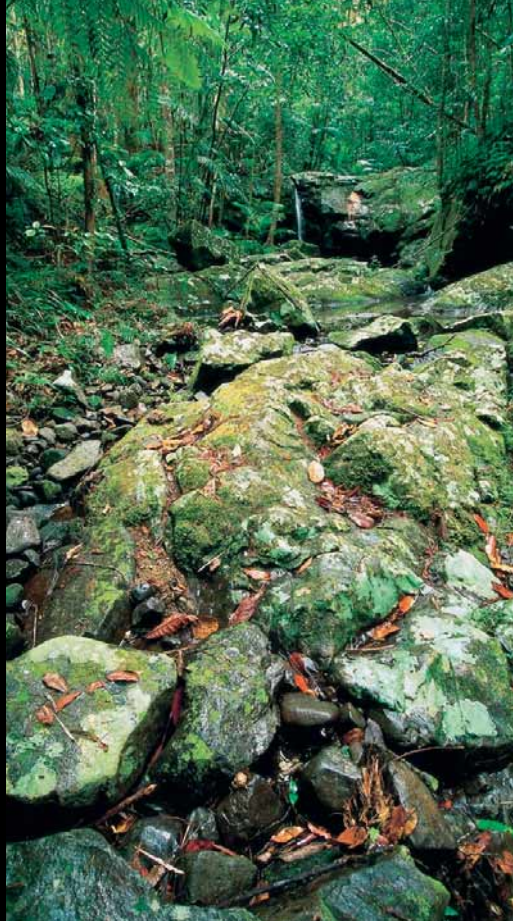
Until this moment, after almost a week in the rainforests of Tropical North Queensland, the cassowary had proved frustratingly elusive. There was one near miss when, on the road to Daintree village, excited tourists minutes ahead in a minibus saw two cassowaries saunter across the road; another while hiking up a highland path on the Atherton Tablelands with Jon Nott of Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat – a cassowary scat so recently deposited that a puff of steam was rising from its partly digested seeds (the bird plays a vital role in seed dispersal in the rainforest via its droppings).

In both cases the birds, heavy enough to qualify for the Olympic featherweight boxing division, melted away without a sound into the dark tangle of undergrowth.

Tropical North Queensland has long been a destination for birdwatchers. More than half of Australia's bird species occur within a relatively compact area, including a dozen found nowhere else in the world – such as the golden bowerbird, whose radiant colours seem to glow in the dim light of the rainforest, and Victoria's riflebird, a type of bird of paradise with a spectacular display where the male shimmies and shakes his iridescent velvet plumage to attract the ladies. Then there is the cassowary. Sure, if you wanted to see one you could just visit a zoo, but for the birdwatcher that defeats the purpose. The birder is addicted to the thrill that comes from tracking down a wild bird in its natural habitat. A cassowary is not nearly as exciting to behold when safely ensconced behind wire or glass. But until now, seeing birds such as the cassowary could be a hit and miss affair unless you were tapped into the local birdwatching networks.

I had flown into Cairns to put a new type of ecotourism initiative to the test. In 2009 a cluster of birdwatching-related businesses got together with the help of Tourism Tropical North Queensland under the banner of Birding Tropical Australia to produce a website and bird trails brochure – a kind of treasure map for those seeking out Australia's rare far-northern birds. By linking their services (bird guiding and birder-friendly accommodation), the theory went, visiting birdwatchers would have access to all the latest information on where the birds were by those who know best.

Staying at each birding accommodation place along the trail, hiring the recommended guides and following only their advice (no maverick behaviour allowed), my aim was to see if I experienced more productive birdwatching than I would have by myself. ➤



TROPICAL NORTH QUEENSLAND



Clockwise from above: Victorian riflebird; TNQ rainforest; great-billed heron; Papuan frogmouth



A night-bird so well-camouflaged it is often mistaken for a stick

Arrival at Red Mill House in Daintree village coincided with the first big downpour of the Wet Season – 160mm in 10 hours. Owners Andrew and Trish Forsyth were there with an umbrella escort to a room three metres away. Accompanied by a chorus of frogs and the drumming of rain on the roof of their Queenslander, the Forsyths presented an itinerary that would lead to parts of the country that most tourists, sticking to resorts on the coast, never get to visit.

The Daintree River is spectacular, particularly at dawn when mist rises off the water; the scent of night-flowering rainforest plants is still in the air and rainforest peaks loom dramatically out of the fog.

I was booked on two Daintree tour boats that cater primarily for birdwatchers. Both Chris Dahlberg, whose Daintree River Tours pioneered bird tours in 1992, and Daintree River Experience, go up some of the smaller rainforest creeks. Ellen Terrell, my Daintree River Experience guide, says, “It’s like looking at the rainforest from inside out.” Here we see things bigger boats often miss: a nesting Papuan frogmouth (a night-bird so well-camouflaged it is often mistaken for a stick); azure kingfishers sitting above the creek bank waiting to dart down onto fish, and the rare great-billed heron, known as the crocodile bird for its fearsome croaking call; and yes, even a crocodile.

Under the canopy of massive trees on Mount Lewis in the high ranges behind Port Douglas, guide Del Richards of Fine Feather Tours shows me a different side to the rainforest. Behind Richards’ whiskers and laconic facade is the sharp eye of a hunter. Within a couple of hours he had found most of the 12 birds endemic to the area including the elusive fernwren, tooth-billed bowerbird and pied monarch.

Trying to find these birds on my own, in the dim light beneath the dense canopy, could have taken days.

The second night’s accommodation is set amongst the rainforest patch of Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge, seeing such beautiful birds as the yellow-breasted boatbill and the buff-breasted paradise-kingfisher. Clear directions from Keith and Lindsay Fisher, the Lodge’s managers, lead almost to the exact trees of birds such as the collared kingfisher and the stately Australian bustard.

Rainforests aren’t the only habitat in this part of the world and at Jabiru Safari Lodge at Mareeba Wetlands Reserve I am taken through dry woodlands that feel more outback than wet tropics. The guide here is the infectiously enthusiastic David “Chook” Crawford. Born and bred on Cape York, Chook comes across as a true-blue bushy, but has the encyclopaedic knowledge of a natural history professor. Though the habitat can appear harsh, it is still full of brilliant birds such as the subtly beautiful and endangered black-throated finch as well as 90 other species that Chook is able to identify. A sunset barbecue overlooking the wetlands and a night under the stars in one of Jabiru’s safari tents rounds off the day.

But still the cassowary is a no-show. After that near sighting with Jon Nott from Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat, a spectacular, bird-rich 93ha property dotted with pole-house cabins he and wife Peta built themselves (Nott is a builder by profession) and land revegetated with 30,000 rainforest trees, there was only one more day to find one.

At Cassowary House in the rainforest just outside Kuranda, in the Cairns hinterland, Sue Gregory, who runs the B&B with her husband Phil (he leads bird tours), insists that a sighting within a 24-hour period is guaranteed. The only trouble is, the cassowary is not a fan of routine and could turn up at any time. Despite being ably led by Cassowary House guide Jun Matsui – who had shown me all the ➤

TROPICAL NORTH QUEENSLAND

From left: blue-faced parrot-finch; yellow-breasted boatbill; pied monarch



It was one of the most exhilarating moments of a birdwatching career

rainforest birds I hadn't yet seen, including the aptly named lovely fairy-wren and the dazzling little sapphire jewel that is the little kingfisher – the cassowary remained conspicuous by its absence. Then, driving back down the mountain towards Cairns, Matsui suddenly pulled over and jumped out, waving his mobile phone and yelling, "Cassowary at Sue's!"

I swung the car around and was soon back at Cassowary House being scrutinised by a male cassowary only inches away. Suppressing a primal urge to run, I sat transfixed as his piercing eyes bored into mine. For most of my life I've been watching birds; now for the first time, one was looking straight back at me. As it loomed over me, I hoped it wasn't holding a grudge for all of its habitat we'd destroyed.

It was the Holy Grail – one of the most exhilarating moments of a birdwatching career, at the end of a most memorable birding trip – 236 bird species in five days, all less than two hours' drive from Cairns airport. In the end, it was not the numbers that were important, but the memories: the flash of emerald and crimson of a blue-faced parrot-finch as I stood on the balcony of my cabin; cruising silently past a jabiru on the lakes at Mareeba Wetlands as the giant waterbird stared intently into the water waiting to strike at an unsuspecting fish; the mesmerising stare of that wild cassowary. 🌐

i Sean Dooley is the author of *The Big Twitch* and *Cooking With Baz*. For more information or a copy of *Bird Trails Tropical Queensland* visit www.birdingtropicalaustralia.com.au

✈ For airfares call **Qantas on 13 13 13** or visit qantas.com
For Queensland holiday packages call **Qantas Holidays on 13 14 15**.

STAY

Red Mill House

11 Stewart Street, Daintree.
(07) 4098 6233. www.redmillhouse.com.au
\$185 for double, includes breakfast.

Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge

RN 6, Mount Kooyong Road, Julatten.
(07) 4094 1263. www.birdwatchers.com.au
\$143 for double self-contained unit, \$28 powered camp site.

Jabiru Safari Lodge

Pickford Road, Bibbohra via Mareeba.
(07) 4093 2514. www.jabirusafarilodge.com.au
\$198pp including meals and activities.

Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat

RN 324 Land Road, Butcher's Creek, Malanda.
(07) 4096 8360.
\$286 for double.

Cassowary House

Blackmountain Road, Kuranda.
(07) 4093 7318. www.cassowary-house.com.au
\$140 for twin room, includes breakfast.

TOURS

Chris Dahlberg's Daintree River Tours

(07) 4098 7997. www.daintreerivertours.com.au
\$55 adult/\$35 child for two-hour tour.

Daintree River Experience

(07) 4098 7480. www.daintreecruises.com.au
\$50 adult/\$35 child for two-hour tour.

Fine Feather Tours

(07) 4094 1199. www.finefeathertours.com.au
Full-day tour \$235 per person (min two people), half-day \$175.

Alan's Wildlife Tours

(07) 4095 3784. www.alanswildlifetours.com.au
Full-day tour \$300 single or couple, half-day \$210.